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Holston Hills Country Club and The Honors Course: A Case Study in East Tennessee Golf Architecture

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Appendix E -

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: KEITH WILLIAMS

College: ENGINEERING Department: CIVIL + ENVIRONMENTAL

Faculty Mentor: DR. DEATHERAGE

PROJECT TITLE: HOLSTON HILLS COUNTRY CLUB AND
THE HONORS COURSE : A CASE STUDY IN EAST
TENNESSEE GOLF ARCHITECTURE

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: , Faculty Mentor

Date: 17 Dec 01

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

Holston Hills Country Club and The Honors Course: A Case Study in East Tennessee Golf Architecture

By Keith Williams II

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Hal Deatherage



Introduction

Golf is unlike any other sport in regards to its playing field. While many other sports seem centered around consistency in dimension, golf offers greater variety from one venue to another than nearly imaginable. In baseball one can count on the distance from home plate to first base being 90 feet, in basketball the rim is always 10 feet off the ground and, of course, in football there is undoubtedly the infamous ten yards needed to gain a first down. Golf, offering a different pace, is free of many of the dimension constraints offered by other sports. Each golf course is entirely unlike any other in existence. Additionally, no one golf course plays the same from day to day. Amazingly, when one considers weather conditions, course conditions, tee and pin placement and other variables, it is safe to say that no two rounds of golf ever played have been identical. Golf courses come, literally, in all shapes and sizes. Some are short and petite, requiring touch and finesse for proper management; while others are brutish and rough, asking the player to flex his muscles during the round.

There has never been a criteria set to define what a “championship” golf course must be. This might be because of the great variety in which golf courses exist. It seems that every time one attempts to place some form of requirement or criteria on classifying a golf course as a “championship test” someone else points out at least one, often many, courses that violate the rule, but are revered across the golf community.

Additionally, golf is unique in the grandeur of its many settings. Can the great settings for any other sport compare with the cliffs of Pebble Beach, the dunes of Kiawah or the rolling hillocks of Sand Hills? Golf is, and forever will be, tied to nature. Golf courses interact with nature on a greater level than nearly any other human built entities. Like parks, they are designed for human enjoyment, but they differ in that many golf courses attempt to mimic the natural world, whereas parks rarely try to hide the imprint of man's hand.

It is because of all of these wonderful, unique aspects that the field of golf course architecture has developed. Because golf courses offer such variety amongst themselves, the desire to create the "best" golf course is only natural. As the game of golf progressed from the early 1800's, both overseas and in America there became a demand for men who were well-versed in the creation of golf courses. Ideally, a golf course architect would be knowledgeable about the strategy behind playing the game of golf as well as possess talents in the field of engineering, construction and agronomy.

The "golden age" of golf course architecture occurred in the early 1900's. Great courses based on sound strategic design were created all across the world. By the depression of the 1930's golf course construction had dramatically decreased and golf courses were not created with such quality and in such prolific amounts again until the late 20th century. When golf courses started being produced again at record rates in the 1960's, 70's and 80's the design and construction process barely resembled that of the golden age. Architects had at their hand the abilities to move vast amounts of earth, they were rarely

constricted by natural obstructions like the architects of an earlier era. Entire landscapes could be changed; the desert floor could be turned to an emerald oasis, mountains could be leveled and giant lakes could be constructed.

With these advances in construction techniques, though, came even more changes in the field of golf course architecture. Never an important issue before, the environment (and its well-being) became paramount in the design and construction of a golf course. Permitting, wetlands delineation, and preserving animal habitats became just as crucial a factor in creating a golf course as the actual design and earth-moving.

It is because of these great changes in the scope of the field that golf course architecture, and in turn the resulting golf courses, have changed so much over the years.

Interestingly, considering how much has changed; construction methods, permitting, turf care evolution, and economic market one can easily see how two separate approaches to creating a golf course can still, in the end, result in a respected and renowned product.

Two perfect examples can be found in the foothills of the Smokey Mountains in East Tennessee. In Knoxville one of the most highly regarded and well respected designs by the great Donald Ross lies on the banks of the Holston River. It is Holston Hills Country Club, a classic course dating back to 1927. On the other hand, in tiny Ooltewah (just north of Chattanooga), sitting hard up against White Oak Mountain is The Honors Course, a modern masterpiece by Pete Dye. The courses are nearly polar in almost all aspects of design and construction, but upon further analysis one sees that they are undeniably great examples of prime golf course architecture.

Holston Hills Country Club

Introduction

Holston Hills Country Club sits in East Knoxville along the shore of the Holston River. The course was completed for play in 1927. It was designed by the Scotsman Donald Ross and upon opening was immediately recognized as one of the best championship tests in the Southeast. The club has hosted the Southern Amateur four times, the NCAA championships twice as well as playing host to the 1945 PGA Knoxville Open and hosting the Tennessee State Amateur Championship seven times.

The most magnificent thing about Holston Hills, though, is not the tournaments it has hosted, but the condition in which the course exists. Very few Donald Ross courses exist today as their original design. Most have been altered over the years and have lost much of the genius that Ross imparted on a course. Holston Hills, luckily, has experienced almost no changes in its 75 year history. The course, though relatively low-key and unknown, is so well respected that it was chosen as the 29th greatest classical (pre-1960) golf design in the United States. Noted golf architecture critic Michael J. Fay stated that he would rather play Holston Hills over any other golf course in the South on a consistent basis.

The Architect

Donald Ross was the most prolific great golf course architect in history. Some 413 courses bear his name. It is unfortunate, though, that at least 1/3 of those courses were never seen or visited by Ross, and a full another 1/3 were only visited by him once or maybe twice. The final 1/3, though, is where all of the Ross masterpieces can be found. Ross is most famous for his design of Pinehurst #2, a course that he worked on and tweaked most of his life. Other great courses by Ross include Seminole Country Club in Florida, Oakland Hills in Michigan and Oak Hill in Rochester, New York.

Donald Ross came from Scotland to America in 1899. He is highly regarded as one of the greatest architects when considering green design. Undoubtedly Ross' early experiences on the great links courses of Scotland influenced his ideas on green contouring.

As an architect, Ross often created very understated but strong design. Rarely were his courses visually striking or distracting. His designs flowed with the land and every golf hole was built with the strategy around the green in mind. One of Ross' favorite design ploys was to place a series of menacing looking bunkers on one side of a green, but leave the other side of the green unbunkered. Instead of bunkers, Ross would place small, undulating hillocks and hollows covered with tightly mown grass. On the approach shot the golfer would typically see the bunkers and steer away from them and play to the

unbunkered side of the green. Thinking they were making the safe play, that was when the golfer fell into Ross' trap because Ross often intentionally designed the recovery shot from the unbunkered side to be much more difficult than the shot required from the opposite, bunkered, side. Such was the subtle mind games that Ross was constantly playing with the golfer on his courses.



Donald Ross

The Course

Holes of Interest: (*note: all distances in yards)

#2, Par 4: 414, 371, 331, 322





The second hole at Holston Hills is a rare cape hole from Donald Ross. The player on the tee must decide whether he wants to draw or fade the tee shot around a tree and bunker in the line of play and how much of the pond he wished to cut off. The more of the pond the player carries, the easier and shorter the approach shot is. The tougher play with the draw off the tee is rewarded because the landing area slants so that a fade will run through the fairway and into the rough. The green employs the classic Ross trick of employing bunkers on the left side of the green to tempt the player to play out to the right where the recovery shot is likely to be difficult considering the undulations and slanting of the green.

#3, Par 4: 406, 380, 347, 335

HH #3



The third hole offers great strategic interest. Off the tee the player views a large bunker complex on the right. The hole doglegs right with the landing area perched on the top of a soft hill. The fairway is wide, but like any strategically designed hole, there is one ideal spot from which to be playing. For the most level lie and best angle into the green the player must challenge the bunkers on the right and play as close to them on his tee shot as possible. A tentative tee shot that is hit away from the bunkers to the left side of the fairway will leave a longer, semi-blind approach from an uphill, sidehill lie; thus vastly reducing the opportunity for birdie on this hole.

#5, Par 5: 614, 554, 511, 451





The fifth hole at Holston Hills is one hole that rewards raw strength. At a length of over 600 yards, the player must put together three well-struck shots in order to reach the green in regulation. Adding to the importance of ball striking are three cross bunkers that must be negotiated en route to the green. Miss-hit any shot and one must formulate a new strategy to avoid the myriad of hazards. The green presents a narrow target that is best approached from left side of the fairway, nearest the fairway bunkers.

#7, Par 5: 475, 464, 450, 412

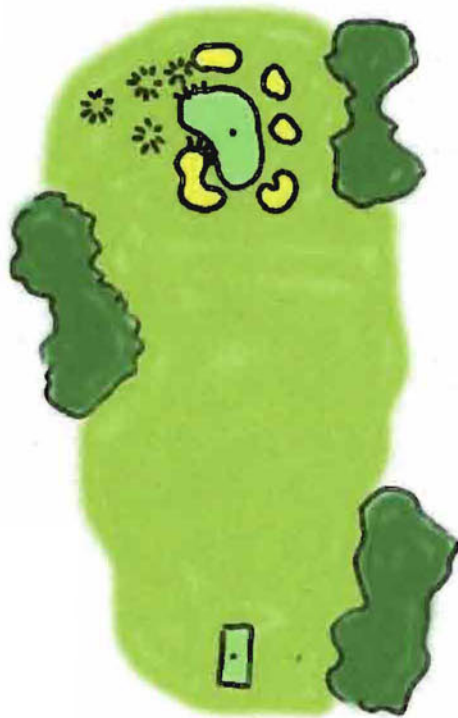




The seventh at Holston Hills is one of the most interesting holes that Donald Ross ever created. Ross was never known for designing holes with multiple routes, but the short par 5 seventh shows how inventive he could be. The player is posed with an option on the tee; either play safe to a lower fairway on the left or make the aggressive play over water to an elevated fairway guarded by bunkers. The reward for the dangerous play is an shortened, unimpeded shot to reach the green in two and make a possible eagle. For the player who opts for the safer tee shot, the next shot is forced to contend with an uphill shot over two cross bunkers that must contend with a tree line on the right. The lower fairway offers almost no opportunity to reach the green in two.

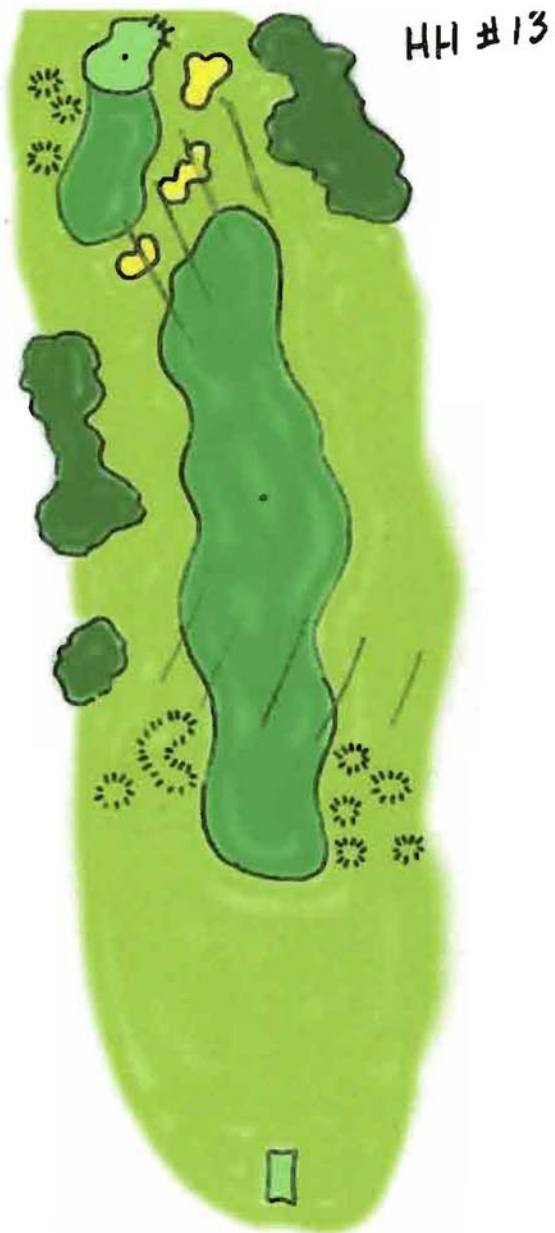
#8, Par 3: 152, 134, 120, 100

HH #8



The short eighth hole at Holston Hills is one of the few visually intimidating holes on the course. When the player steps onto the tee he sees a small, narrow green surrounded by deep bunkers. The hole has a striking similarity to the “postage stamp” hole at Royal Troon in Scotland. The eighth is an unusual example of Ross employing penal architecture. On the short eighth the options are either execute the shot and hit the green, or pay the price with a difficult recovery shot.

#13, Par 4: 426, 367, 350, 290





The primary reason for highlighting the 13th hole at Holston Hills is to show how Donald Ross dealt with creating a hole over less than ideal terrain. Because of where the 12th hole ends, the tee shot on the 13th is blind, but Ross wisely gave the player guiding mounds to indicate the line of play. He further complicated play on the hole by creating a diagonal set of cross bunkers forcing the player who has not struck a solid drive to contend with. Any tee shot not struck purely brings the cross-hazards into play.

#15, Par 4: 380, 362, 352, 281





Once upon a time the 15th at Holston Hills was a very intimidating golf hole. A series of striking mounds crosses the fairway about 190 yards from the tee. Years ago, when the ball didn't travel nearly the distance it does today, the mounds required a nearly perfectly struck tee shot to negotiate. Today the mounds can easily be carried by a fairway wood or long iron, thus the strategy of the hole has been compromised. Nevertheless the 15th hole provides an illustration of a side of Donald Ross that many of his courses do not display.

The Honors Course

Introduction

In the early 1980's Jack Lupton, the Coca-Cola magnate, decided to build his ideal golf course. As a member of Augusta National Golf Club, he had great respect for the heritage of amateur golfers in America. Mr. Lupton envisioned a pure golfing retreat where Chattanooga businessmen could escape the pace of the real world and enjoy a world class golf course. He selected a parcel of land in rural Ooltewah, north of Chattanooga. Mr. Lupton commissioned Pete Dye to design the course on the wooded 460 acres.

The Honors Course opened in 1983. It has since been recognized as one of the best modern designs in the world. Pete Dye was just coming off the completion of the TPC at Sawgrass and the Long Cove Club when he designed The Honors Course. Mr. Lupton requested a "straight-forward, honest" course. Dye produced a course that is every bit as challenging as any of his other designs, but comes across to the player as less contrived and more natural than most other Dye designs.

The natural feel of the The Honors is amazing considering there are approximately 89 acres of artificial ponds on the site and huge amounts of earth were moved in construction. Much of the natural image that the course exudes comes from the variety of grasses employed on the site. Everywhere a visitor looks they see different colors and textures of grass.

Since its opening, The Honors Course has hosted the United States Amateur Championship (1991), the 1996 NCAA championships (the individual winner was Tiger Woods), and the 1994 Curtis Cup Matches.

The Architect

Pete Dye was undoubtedly the most influential architect of the 20th century. Some might also consider him the best. Pete burst into the golf course architecture scene in 1969 when he opened Harbour Town Golf Links on Hilton Head Island. The course immediately received a PGA Tour stop and, according to some experts, ushered in the modern era of golf design.

Dye did not spend his entire life preparing for a career in golf course architecture. He went to college and studied business and for years made a living in an insurance practice. Harbour Town was not Pete's first project. Crooked Stick and The Golf Club both preceded it and they both immediately garnered fame once the Dye name became famous.

If there is one thing that Pete Dye's style isn't, it's subtle. Dye, more than any other architect in history, employs visual intimidation in his design. He designs his golf courses to be challenging and he will not hesitate to ask the golfer to execute extremely difficult shots. Often, though, the psychological game that Pete plays with the golfer is the most damaging influence on their score. A round on many Pete Dye courses is an experience in small targets, intimidating hazards and creative shaping.

Dye is very much a hands-on designer and one can see the personal influence in the details of his designs. Many of Dye's most inventive design aspects became the norm

golf course architecture in the 1980's and 1990's. These include the island green par 3, shoring up water hazards with wooden bulkheads, and the rebirth of the pot bunker.

Many of Dye's great courses have gone on to host major championships and have influenced the entire world of golf course design; they include The Golf Club in Indiana, Harbour Town Golf Links, the TPC at Sawgrass in Florida, PGA West in California, Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic, the Ocean Course on Kiawah Island and Whistling Straits in Kohler, Wisconsin.

The Course

Holes of Interest:

#1, Par 4: 401, 380, 360, 354, 314, 267



The first hole on The Honors Course opens the player up rather gently. Dye indicates to the player on the tee where to hit the ball with the bunker down the left hand side of the fairway. He is indicating to the player that the best line is out to the right, which will yield the better angle into the green.

#2, Par 5: 520, 503, 490, 482, 427, 418





One of the author's favorite holes, the 2nd at The Honors is a reachable par 5. A lone bunker on the right hand side is visible from the tee, but the player can tell that the hole turns from left to right. Instinctively the golfer knows that they must flirt with the deep bunker off the tee to be in position to reach the green in two shots. The second shot is visually intimidating with the huge bunker complex stretching along the edge of the fairway and in front of the green. A large tree growing from a bunker obstructs the line to the hole. The green is shallow when approached from the angle to hit it in two, but opens up if the player opts to lay-up to the left side of the fairway. Deep pot bunkers sit at the rear of the green to punish any inaccurate approach. An excellent risk-reward hole where the player must decide whether it is worth attempting to reach the green in two strokes.

#4, Par 4: 433, 403, 365, 360, 345, 313



The fourth is another excellent hole by Dye. The hole turns to the right, offering a diagonal hazard in the form of a large bunker along the right hand side. The golfer must play as close as possible to the fairway bunker to open up the approach to the green. If the golfer hits a tee shot to the left side of the fairway, a large tree overhangs and obstructs the line of play. The player must decide whether playing near the fairway bunker is worth the reward of the easier approach.

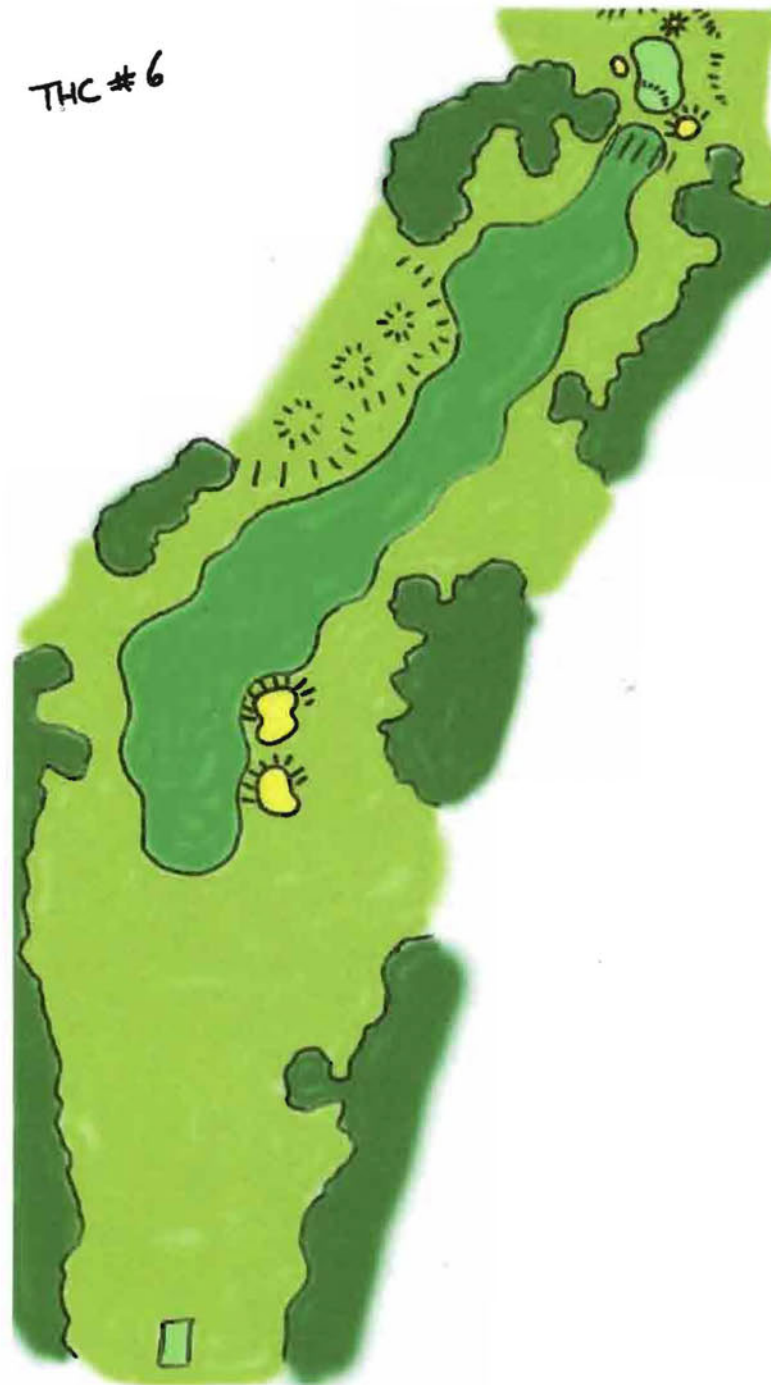
#5, Par 4: 459, 423, 410, 402, 387, 304





The fifth hole at The Honors is one of the most strategically sound holes on the course. It is a long par 4 and it uses a theme commonly employed by Dye. The tee shot turns from right to left and the angle of turn is accentuated by a huge tree growing out of a large bunker. The second shot then requires a shot that turns from left to right as a result of the angle of the green and trees encroaching on the right. Dye commonly designs holes that test a player's skill at working the ball in both directions. The long fifth is a perfect example of that type of design.

#6, Par 5: 546, 520, 515, 493, 476, 424





The sixth hole at The Honors Course is a long par 5. The strategy on this hole results from a large tree that overhangs the green on the left side. The skilled player will hit a tee shot that negotiates the two large fairway bunkers at the curve of the dogleg and then will work the ball along the right side of the fairway to avoid the large tree. If played any differently, for example from the left side of the fairway, the hole could prove to be very interesting with the large tree in play.

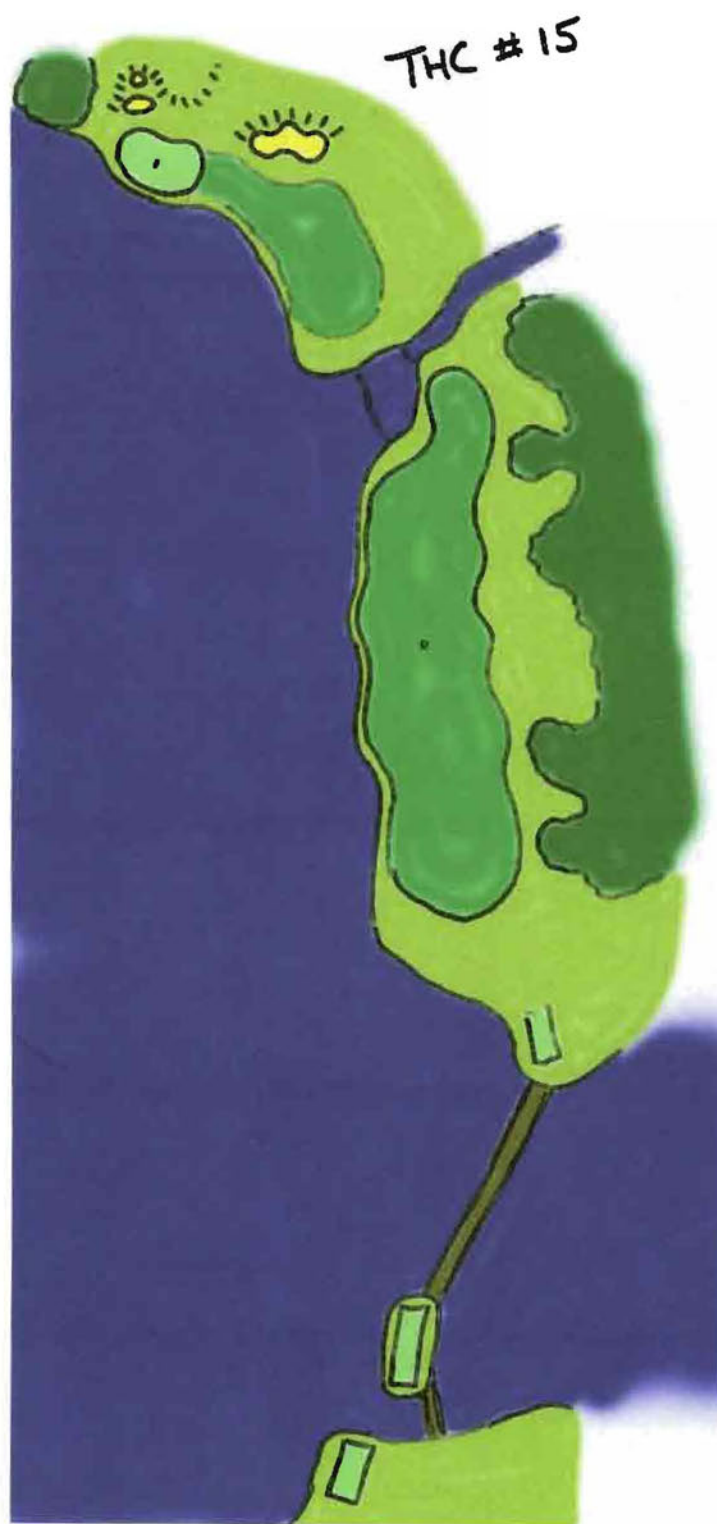
#14, Par 3: 156, 137, 130, 117, 108, 78





The short par 3 14th is a perfect example of Pete Dye's visually intimidating style of design. The hole is very penal in its design style. The golfer either hits the green or is forced to hit a recovery shot from very deep rough or a bunker. Visually, the hole is very striking and undoubtedly plays with the golfer's mind when he approaches the tee.

#15, Par 4: 443, 422, 396, 374, 314, 296





The 15th is possibly the best hole on the entire course. It honestly needs very little explanation. The player is faced with a long tee shot over water and the immediate question is, “how much water can I cut off?” The more water that the player carries, the shorter and easier the approach. The risk is heavy, but the possibility of making a birdie on one of the hardest holes on the course is almost irresistible.

#16, Par 3: 208, 156, 150, 146, 127, 109

THC #1





The 16th at The Honors provides the nearly stereotypical Pete Dye par 3 down the closing stretch. Pete Dye has always been fond of putting a very long, challenging, often wet par 3 somewhere in the closing holes. The 16th fits the bill perfectly. At 208 yards, all carry over water, the hole in certain weather conditions must be almost impossible to play. This, of course, is exactly what Pete Dye wanted as part of the closing to The Honors Course.

Conclusion

One can see from viewing each course that Holston Hills Country Club and The Honors Course contrast in many facets regarding golf course design. Also very apparent, though, is the fact that both courses are incredible designs and each one challenges the golfer in its own way.

Holston Hills is classic Donald Ross, subdued and quiet. It takes a keen eye to discern all of the important design elements in each hole. The course fits the land like a glove and with the exception of only a few holes, it appears as if there was no earth moved in construction.

The Honors Course, on the other hand, is a perfect reflection of Pete Dye's "in your face" philosophy of golf design. Dye clearly displays to the player the areas where trouble lurks, and he wants the hazards to fill the players mind. The design of The Honors Course is more natural than other Dye layouts, but the unmistakable Dye elements are all present; holes edging lateral water hazards, difficult par 3's and deep, treacherous bunkering.

Both courses provide an excellent example of how two separate routes, divided by time, money and technology, can be taken to design a course and equally excellent challenges can be the result.